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SUBJECT: Senegal: Mouride thugs ransack media group

¶1. (SBU) Summary. On September 25, a group of thugs led by Mame Thierno Mbacke forcibly removed Sidy Lamine Niasse, founder of the Walfadjri media group, from his home and ransacked the group's headquarters. Mame Thierno Mbacke is the brother and assistant of politico-religious leader Modou Kara MBacke. Kara is the guru for a large number of disaffected and impoverished urban youth. His followers call him "General" Kara and he, de facto, leads a large group of militants that gives him substantial bargaining power with the ruling party. End Summary.

The Heart of the Matter

¶2. (SBU) The incident was triggered by an interview in which a half-brother of Kara accused him of supporting President Abdoulaye Wade only for material gains. He also criticized him for failing to take care of their mother. It was after Walfadjri published the interview that they received a visit from Kara's followers. Meanwhile, the half-brother, who lives in Italy as a Senegalese immigrant worker, has allegedly received death threats and fears for his life if he returns to Senegal.

Kidnapping a Media Leader

¶3. (SBU) On September 25 around 14:00, a group of young men led by Mame Thierno Mbacke went to the headquarters of Walfadjri demanding to be put on air to respond to the defamation against their leader. When this demand was rejected they started beating employees and vandalizing the premises of the radio station. At the same time, another group went to the home of CEO Sidy Lamine Niasse and told him "You have to come with us to talk to our Marabout (religious leader)." When Niasse declined their offer, they seized him and carried him by force to the home of Mame Thierno Mbacke. Niasse told Embassy that he made it clear to Mame Thierno that "he held him responsible for whatever happens to him but he had nothing to tell him." Mame Thierno ordered his release.

The GOS is the Culprit

¶4. (SBU) When he was released, Niasse immediately went to his headquarters to organize a response. While he accused the state of being behind the attack he later admitted to Poloff that he has no evidence to back up his claim. However, he added "I accuse them, because people like Modou Kara only attack those they think are weak and the state has undertaken many efforts to weaken me." He gave examples of government agencies cutting his signal twice in 2007 and 2009 and of an inflated June 2009 tax bill of 339 million CFA (USD 650,000). That amount was reduced to 18 million CFA (USD 36,000) after he asked President Wade for help. In a show of unity, almost all political leaders from the opposition went to his headquarters and some, including the Mayor of Dakar, made live statements on Walf TV. They denounced the GOS's authoritarian methods to intimidate the media. In response, the Minister of Communication, Moustapha Guirassy, also went to Walfadjri to express regrets for the attack, but denied any involvement by the state.

15. (SBU) Niasse indicated early in the process that, even though the vandals were filmed in broad daylight, he would not take the matter to court but would rather leave it to the prosecutor to act. The Prosecutor of the Republic duly ordered an investigation by the DIC (the national police's Department of Criminal Investigation.) They interrogated Mame Thierno for 8 hours, but they did not arrest him. They then ordered him to report for a second interview but he ignored the order. The Mouride religious leader of Darou Mouhty, where Mame Thierno is from, allegedly told the government that it would be unacceptable to them if Thierno was arrested. Since then, the case has been dropped and Mame Thierno remains free, despite his contempt of the DIC's order. Sidy Lamine Niasse told Poloff that he did not want to take the matter to court because he knows that "sociological" realities make it difficult for the state to prosecute a religious leader without alienating influential members of various religious brotherhoods. Modou Kara Mbacke subsequently apologized to Niasse and the state will probably show more leniency in various fiscal and IPR litigations that it has pending against Walfadjri.

16. (SBU) Comment. This incident once again demonstrates the fragility of freedom of expression in Senegal. Both the GOS and organized religious groups have shown little tolerance for dissent, especially by the media. Despite claiming the contrary, the parliament has, since 2005, been sitting on a draft law to decriminalize media crimes. Additionally, the complacency shown by investigative authorities in bringing the vandals to justice underscores the government's passive complicity in attempting to

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silence independent media voices. End comment.
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